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ABSTRACT

This program deals with the child-school "fit" as seen in the context of child development, childhood stress, and children's emotional well-being. It reviews psychological principles and shows their implications for how schools might be optimally structured and managed to help all children cope more effectively. The text begins with the importance of strengthening a child's sense of security and how such security is frequently a casualty of a rapidly changing world. Suggestions for lessening latent anxiety and strengthening children's security include establish schools as a safeplace to learn, quiet, and orderly; make the school day predictable with regular schedules and set routines; emphasize direct instruction by the teacher; help children to attend by structuring the classroom environment; and the school curriculum should be developmentally appropriate. The importance of adult authority and its meaning to the child is also explored; it is recommended that teachers be reestablished as authority figures and that teachers be reinforced as persons with knowledge to impart. Some of the links between achievement and competence, such as building self-confidence through realistic academic achievement, are discussed, and tips for eliciting responsible social behavior are offered. (RJM)

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Designing The Kind of Schools Our Children Need: Structure and Management from a Psychological Perspective

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Designing The Kind of Schools Our Children Need:
Structure and Management from a Psychological Perspective

Louis Chandler

Rapid social change brings with it profound implications for child rearing, and for schooling. Today's children come to school with problems that are markedly different from those of only a few generations ago. Because school is such a large part of a children's lives, the school experience is highly significant for child development.

Along with the formal learning that takes place, schools can provide experiences which strengthen children's ability to cope with rapid social change. Thus children may accrue secondary gain from the school experience such as: a heightened sense of security, greater self-confidence, a sense of the importance of individual achievement, inner motivation, self-discipline, respect for authority, and responsible social behavior. These are the qualities that will help them succeed in life, and contribute to a civilized society.

Unfortunately, many of the current practices in the school, far from helping children to develop those qualities, and to cope more effectively with life stress, have the unintended consequences of placing additional stress on children living in a fast-paced, changing world. Rather than serving to ameliorate the effects of rapid social change, or to remain benignly indifferent to those forces, today's schools have adopted practices that, in many cases, actually exacerbate the problem --violating the physician's first rule: "do no harm".

This paper deals with the child-school "fit" as seen in the context of child development, childhood stress, and children's emotional well-being. It reviews some psychological principles, and shows their implications for *how schools might be optimally structured and managed* to help all children to cope more effectively.

Strengthening a Sense of Security

The task of raising children today often seems overwhelming, especially in the light of the many competing demands on one's time. Professor David Elkind describes the contemporary parent as living in a "pressure cooker" of competing demands, role changes, and personal and professional uncertainties. Little surplus time and energy is left over for the child, and "quality time" cannot make up for the fact that time and energy used in work, and in managing the various demands of an active life, leave little for the child.

Single-parent and dual career families have also contributed to the decline in care, attention and supervision given to children. Where once parents supervised children very closely, even to the age of adolescent rebellion and beyond, that is no longer the case for many of today's children. Because of uncaring or overextended parents, they find themselves left largely to their own resources; the traditional parental supports of nurturance and protection are unavailable to them. The proportion of those children who have to take care of themselves after school, the so called "latch key kids" is on the increase, reflecting the diminished child care and supervision by parents.

Children today live in a fast-paced world, where instant gratification has become expected and any delay of gratification seems intolerable. They grow up on MTV, sound bites and short bursts of visual images which condition them to shortened attention spans. In a world that is constantly changing, living lives that feel the effects of dislocation, and upheaval, of hurried schedules, and fragmented contacts with various adults, many children are left confused, uncertain, and tentative about life. Insecure, they are ill-prepared for the rigors of school.

In today's climate, instead of their protection, parents offer information to their children. Children must learn survival skills: how to operate the microwave; how to avoid suspicious strangers. They are dropped off at Karate classes so they can learn to defend themselves in a world increasingly seen as hostile, a world view that their parents and the media reinforce. "The world is a dangerous place", they will hear again and again. And the media will provide a steady diet of examples to reinforce their fears. It is a world where the Kindergarten teacher can't be trusted, where adults are lurking to prey on little children. And so they are taught no to rely on adult protection, but to learn self-defense. They are taught to fear AIDS, even as they may have only the vaguest notion of what sex is all about!

For these children, and for all those who may come from disrupted homes or disjointed families, it is important to provide *a place that fosters security*. Children who are anxious because of disruptive lives outside of school have trouble attending and staying focused on the task at hand. Studies of children of divorce have amply demonstrated that they show better coping and academic work in schools that are structured and stable. For such children, school is a refuge, a safe place where they should be able to find shelter which will allow them to develop fully.

To lessen latent anxiety, and strengthen children's sense of security:

- *Establish the school as a safe, quiet, orderly place to learn.* The classroom environment may hinder, or facilitate, learning. Creating a place that is quiet, orderly and structured, helps to reduce stress, lessens anxiety, and allows children to free up energy that can be more appropriately devoted to learning. From a predictable, secure

environment children can venture forth more confidently to explore and meet new challenges, and to become actively engaged in learning.

- *Make the school day predictable with a regular schedule*. Minimize disruptions. A predictable environment reduces stress that comes from confronting the unknown. A predictable school day with a regular routine provides a sense of continuity and is useful in taking some of the ambiguity and uncertainty out of children's lives.

- *Regularize the schedule with a set routine*. This provides the child with additional structure, predictability and security. If the classroom is a constantly changing kaleidoscope of adults and children grouping and re-grouping in various configurations with attendant noise and confusion, the effects on children will be to overstimulate them and increase free-floating anxiety.

- *Emphasize direct instruction by the teacher*. Child-centered teaching techniques such as those which are said to capitalize on the child's natural desire to explore to learn, or those which rely on peers as tutors, my have some limited value in carefully studied applications; but they will have the unintended consequences of depriving children of the many of the formal aspects of learning. Direct instruction, while being efficient in terms of time and effort, provides a teleological component often missing from unstructured and serendipitous learning, correctly directs students who may be developmentally ill-equipped to learn progressively if left to their own devices. Direct teacher instruction has the added advantage of re-reinforcing the teacher's role as adult authority, a role we will discuss below. Finally, direct instruction reinforces the notion of school as a special place, one different from home (where incidental learning dominates much of the child's life). Unlike home, school is a place where with its own set of rules, a place where learning is formal, structured, and demands attention and concentrated effort.

- *Help children to attend by structuring their classroom environment*. See to it that the teacher is the focal point in the front and center of the room. Assure that eye contact with the children is easy and natural. This helps children with attentional problems. Moreover, carefully consider seating to reduce distractions and the opportunity for social interactions. For younger children especially some attention should be given to their sense of space. An assigned seat, clearly labeled, for example, helps the young child to structure things.

- *The school curriculum should be developmentally appropriate*, that is, carefully designed not to subject children to adult concerns and social problems which they are ill-equipped to confront. While there are social problems and concerns, it is always a mistake to force children to directly confront them. The view of the world as a troubling place, filled with threats, -- a view fed by television, is one which will exacerbate insecurity. Children must be given the impression that adults are in charge, and can generally be trusted to do the right thing. They will have to confront adult reality soon enough, in the meantime -- let children be children.

Adult Authority and its Meaning to the Child.

Professor Diane Ravitch has correctly pointed out that education, i.e., whenever students are gathered to learn from the teacher, is by its very nature an exercise in authority. And adult authority provides a key component in strengthening children's feelings of basic trust and security. While adults may differ on their more realistic views of authority and its place in their lives, children see things much differently. Children invest adult authority figures with a wealth of meanings that far exceeds the reality of their roles. To children, the adult is the person in charge, the one who brings order our of chaos, corrects all wrongs, balances injustices, and controls those forces that, if left unchecked, threaten to overwhelm the child. Children have a tendency to see adults in authority as helpful and protective. The caring adult, by the very nature of that role, provides protection, care, love, and reasonable measure of discipline.

Adults provide the structure children need to feel basically secure, with the comfort that the world is not a chaotic and meaningless place. Adults imposes external discipline, the necessary first step towards developing inner discipline --- a quality that children will need to face later challenges in life, and contribute to a civilized society.

At its fundamental core the notion of authority is imbued in children in the home beginning with fathers and mothers Teachers have authority only insofar as they stand in for the parents. This borrowed authority is what, in the past, has allowed a single teacher to manage a classroom of 20 or 30 youngsters. It is the *notion* of adult authority that's important here. The adult is the person in charge, the person who deserves respect and attention simply because of his or her special status.

It is essential that school authorities do nothing to erode their special status in the child's eyes. We are seeing an increasing breakdown of discipline in the schools and at home. Juvenile delinquency has risen to records heights, to the point that the courts are re-considering their long held humanitarian stance that children should not be tried as adults. Further erosion of adult authority does not seem to be very helpful if we are to encourage more civilized behavior among our youngsters. Therefore:

- *Re-establish the teacher as an authority figure.* Do nothing to detract from the respect that should be accorded the teacher simply by virtue of his or her position. Teachers, like parents, are powerful symbols of adult authority for children. They set limits. They mediate and interpret the world for children. In the process they foster the children's emotional development helping them to find ways to cope with stress.

- *Reinforce the definition of the teacher* as someone who has knowledge to impart. This increases the teacher's prestige and thus authority, and helps to assure the students' attention and respect because of the unique role the teacher plays. Instead of

reducing the teacher's status to, at best, another bureaucrat (e.g., facilitator, coordinator, manager, counselor, and/or resource person), or at worst a peer of the students, this restores the teacher to his or her proper central place in the classroom.

- *Use the authority vested in parents to reinforce teacher authority.* Parents can be powerful forces for establishing and maintaining the teacher's authority, and should be used as allies in that effort. Cooperation between teaches and parents is essential, so that parents feel confident that they can place their trust in the teachers and the schools, and thus give their considerable moral support to the educational program. The proper role of parents does not blur the lines between home and school, but recognizes that each has a proper domain to contribute to the child's well-being.

The Link Between Achievement and Competence

The growth of a sense of competence is furthered mainly by "effectance" activities, that is those which the child can see and assess the effect of what he or she is doing, using feedback to improve performance, and concomitantly to judge whether he or she is a successful performer. The child's actual competence *and* sense of competence, develops in response to such self-assessed feedback.

- *Build self confidence through realistic academic achievement.* Linking self-confidence to real achievement helps students see the value of their hard work and efforts. Certainly self-confidence is a useful quality to develop, but making mistakes and seeing the consequences, or having them pointed out to you so you can correct them are natural and important components of learning, and may provide the basis for a realistic sense of self-esteem.

- *Restore the value of individual achievement,* teaching the child to assume personal responsibility for his or her success or failure, and a striving for excellence with justifiable pride in accomplishment, can serve as powerful motivator for children -- a lesson for life as well as for school.

- *Be honest in evaluating academic performance.* Although success may not always come easily, lessons should be carefully structured so that it never is completely beyond the grasp of children. While it is true that children's feelings of competence are closely tied to their perceptions of their academic progress, being overly concerned with damaging children's self-esteem is foolhardy. At best, creating artificial success is disingenuous. The child will only be temporarily fooled, if at all. Telling a child he is doing well, when he clearly is not, serves only to reinforce the notion that adults cannot be trusted; they will lie to you when it is expedient to do so. The bond of trust between adult and child is thus once more weakened. Just as children must learn to take pride in their strengths, they must also come to terms with their limits -- it's a normal part of growing up. Knowing one's academic status and understanding the expectations of significant adults reduces the stress that ambiguity

can induce. Teachers' characterizations of children's progress should be both sympathetic and realistic.

- *Use grades and tests that realistically reflect actual student achievement.* This serves to clarify where the child stands academically and in terms of skills development. We all need to know "how am I doing?" Children often know when adults are not honest with them, and they are also quite capable of judging and comparing their progress with their peers. Evaluative systems which are dishonest encourage the child not to trust adults, and may give parents unrealistic expectation which can be deleterious for the child. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that such duplicity increases children's self-esteem. Finally, children can be shown progress when compared against *their own* previous levels of accomplishment, thus assuring justifiable pride in achievement.

- *Set clear expectations for academic performance.* Unrealistic and vague expectations can be a source of considerable stress to children. Therefore, teachers should help youngsters and their parents to set realistic academic goals. Therefore, teachers are well equipped to help both youngsters and their parents in setting levels of expectation that challenge, but do not overwhelm, children. But to do so, the teacher must be allowed to render fair and honest judgments, free of administrative or parental pressure.

Responsible Social Behavior

In addition to the expectation that the schools will teach academic subjects, there exists a tacit compact between parents and teachers -- an agreement to cooperatively socialize the young. For true cooperation to be realized between parents and teachers, teachers must know they will be supported by parents. Parents, for their part, must be shown that they can place their trust in the teachers and the school to educate their children, and to assist in the socialization process.

Discipline and classroom rules help to create a sense of structure for children. They introduce the notion of right and wrong. They emphasize the teacher as an authority figure. They remind children that actions have consequences, and that individuals must take personal responsibility for their actions.

- *Establish and consistently enforce classroom rules.* Children and adults perceive limits from two quite different perspectives. While adults may resent the imposition of limits as an affront to personal freedom, children find that physical and psychological limits make the world more manageable, more secure, more understandable. Limits help children develop self-control. The ultimate goal is to help children develop inner controls; therefore, external controls in the form of classroom rules are an important first step. Such rules should be kept to a minimum, clearly

stated, and consistently enforced. They must be evenly applied; without prejudice, and with the possibility of a fresh start.

- *Establish a clearly-defined discipline policy.* Discipline imposed by adults is the first step in children's development of self-discipline. Therefore, teachers should develop reasonable, clearly stated disciplinary policies. Punishment should be applied fairly, immediately, in proportion to the offense, and without recrimination. Children should always see the possibility of making a fresh start. To help children learn responsible behavior, teachers should reinforce the concept that behavior always carries consequences. The message, "If you do X. then Y will follow," points out the consequences in a non-threatening way. It renders predictable the reactions of others to specific behaviors. It reduces the ambiguity surrounding adult expectations. Simultaneously, it suggests to children ways in which they might modify their behavior to meet those expectations.

Conclusions

The current over-emphasis on "the whole child" within the classroom is misplaced. For example, It leads people to believe that there is a direct and linear relationship between content of lessons and self-esteem. The resulting "psychologizing" of the curriculum has been vastly oversold. Academic instruction must now share valuable curriculum time with issues that have questionable validity in their classroom application.

It must be remembered that the primary responsibility for the child's developmental and emotional well-being is, and remains, the parents', not the schools'. Nevertheless, the schools can provide a useful component in facilitating child development by doing their *primary* job well, and by the secondary gain they achieve through the way they are structured and managed.